

# Organizing Centralized County Highway Operations

CLYDE McLELAND  
County Highway Supervisor  
Steuben County Highway Department  
Angola, Indiana

The 92 counties in Indiana, responsible for 79,000 miles of roads, vary greatly in size, wealth, population, and physical characteristics; yet they have one problem that is common to all counties—the increasing demand for better highways and highway service.

Since it is obvious that the available finances are far less than the dollar need for county highway improvement, it is essential that every means be taken to obtain the maximum efficiency and economy in all county highway operations. Every wasted dollar only widens the gap between the available and the needed dollar.

Although the highway department is not an organization to show a profit from the furnishing of a product or the providing of a service, its operation should be conducted as though it were; the accepted business methods used by private organizations to achieve economy and efficiency of operation should be utilized.

Statewide there is no uniform pattern of county highway operation. Different methods produce different results. There are counties in which the management of operation is termed good and there are others where it is described as poor. But on the average those counties who have made use of technical and experienced personnel in the execution of highway operations have produced the best results. However, in those counties we describe as well managed, there exists a great variation in how operations are carried out and also a difference in the end result.

To build and maintain a county highway system properly there are certain definite actions which must be performed and those actions must be done correctly. Poor highway management can result either from failure to perform all the actions or from doing them incorrectly.

The key to any operating organization is the type personnel employed. Since the highway department deals almost entirely with the

public and is spending public funds, this applies particularly to its operation. The working force must be made up of a well trained, well disciplined, permanent force who know their jobs and are willing to carry them out with a minimum of wasted time and effort for the desired end result. Each employee must feel that he is a useful and necessary part of the department. If he has such a feeling, regardless of whether he recognizes it or not, it will reflect itself in his work and his relations with the public.

The formulation of road policy and road program is basically the responsibility of the boards of county commissioners but the execution of these policies and programs should be delegated to a staff of competent, experienced highway personnel. Therefore the initial step must be taken by the boards of county commissioners, by hiring experienced, competent, and qualified supervisory personnel.

Like any business, the highway department should have an office. This should be the centralized point of the operation. The size, staff, and work load vary with highway responsibility, but the basic functions are the same in all counties, which includes the organization and direction of the employees, accounting, budget preparation and control, purchasing, planning, etc.

Daily activities of maintenance and construction on a county highway system requires many different types of equipment and employment of persons with many skills, therefore operating from a central location gives those responsible for the direction of the operation, closer contact with the employees, a better opportunity to coordinate their day to day efforts so that men and machinery are fully utilized. In counties where more than one location is used as a base for operations, or where the work load is of such magnitude, then assistant supervisors should be delegated supervisory authority. Close contact should be maintained between assistants and those in charge of the operation by radio or other means. Daily observation of the work sheets is essential. It is perhaps the best method to determine if each employee is carrying his part of the work load or if he is just putting in his time.

"Park it under the apple tree tonight" is the phrase used in several counties that permit their employees to use their residence as a base of operation. How many of you supervisors have stopped to figure the high cost of overhead on that open air garage? Minor repairs that should be given immediate attention are either patched up temporarily or forgotten and then at some later date major repairs are required. Everyday maintenance on equipment should be checked periodically to eliminate carelessness or laxity on the part of the employee.

Highway departments should make use of available weather information. If a tornado warning is received notify all employees to report immediately to their base of operations. All emergency equipment and highway personnel should be ready to move to the area of destruction as soon as the need arises. Do not wait until the storm tears down communication lines, power lines or washes out roads and then try to assemble the work crews. Lives depend on the action your department takes.

During the winter months when snow and high winds cause highways to become hazardous, a twenty-four hour alert should be in effect. Each county should be sure their ice and snow removal equipment is kept ready to go at all times and there are enough employees available to operate equipment around the clock if necessary.

Each county can achieve better results by providing information designed to correctly inform its employees and the public on highway policies, needs and programs. Working from a central location gives those in charge of operations a better opportunity to contact and inform employees of day to day changes, programming, and to answer questions concerning their problems, thereby creating a more harmonious relationship between management and employees.

Operating a successful county highway operation entails a series of relationships, some of them continuing and stable, others changing in detail. When each member of the department recognizes the essential importance of the others duties and responsibilities, an atmosphere of mutual respect and confidence will result. That atmosphere is the key to a successful operation—without it, neither confidence nor effective operations are possible.

The board of commissioners must understand that its responsibility in providing the best county highway system possible is the exercise of judgment in establishing all highway department policies. In reflecting the will of the people, the board of commissioners must choose the best methods to serve that highway system most economically. Because technical assistance is needed to accomplish this, the board of commissioners must choose as the executive officer to carry out its policies, the best qualified man who can be found, then allow him to exercise the skills he was employed to use in the boards behalf.

It is the responsibility of the board of commissioners to continually appraise the results achieved. This must be done to make sure those results show continued use of the best methods and the best persons in carrying out their policies and that the policies themselves continue to be the best ones.

The engineer or supervisor must understand that his major function is to make sure the policies of the board of commissioners are implemented exactly as established, and by the most effective means possible. He must remember that his skills, properly used are the commissioners best tool for achieving the goal desired.